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ABSTRACT

This study investigated preservice teachers' perceptions of discipline, using questionnaires and followup interviews to obtain insight into their views regarding guidance, discipline, and punishment, as well as influences contributing to the formation of these views. The questionnaire included five demographic items and five open-ended questions. Participants were undergraduate students majoring in elementary education at two public universities. All participants responded to the questionnaire before beginning student teaching. Questionnaires were individually analyzed by two researchers to identify patterns or similarities. Findings from a collaborative analysis of researchers' notes served as the basis for developing three semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were conducted with 20 respondents who indicated interest in further participation in the study. The results support the conclusion that most preservice teachers can clearly define guidance in positive terms of modeling and leading. However, conspicuously absent from their definition is any reference to the task of the classroom teacher to foster the development of self-control and socialization skills and to create the context for positive discipline. Students readied by the university to practice their profession rely more heavily on information they glean through personal experience than through instruction received in the teacher education program. (Author/SM)

Future Teachers' Perceptions of Discipline

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze preservice teachers' perceptions of discipline. This qualitative inquiry employed the use of questionnaires and follow-up interviews to obtain insight into the views of future teachers regarding guidance, discipline, and punishment, as well as the influences that contributed to the formation of these views.

The questionnaire consisted of five demographic items and five open-ended questions. Subjects were undergraduate students (n=90) majoring in elementary education at two public universities located in the southern United States. All subjects had completed the prerequisites required for student teaching and responded to the questionnaire prior to beginning their student teaching experience.

Questionnaires were individually analyzed by two researchers for the purpose of identifying patterns or similarities. Following a collaborative analysis of the researchers' notes, tentative findings were formulated. These findings served as the basis for developing three semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were conducted with 20 respondents who indicated an interest in further participation in this study.

The results of this study support the conclusion that most preservice teachers can clearly define guidance in positive terms of modeling and leading. Yet, conspicuously absent from their definition is any reference to the task of the classroom teacher to foster the development of self-control and socialization skills, and to create the context for positive discipline. Students readied by the university to practice their profession rely more heavily on information they have gleaned through personal experience than through instruction received in the teacher education programs.

Introduction

“No matter the size of the school or the grade level taught, student discipline is implicit in the daily operation of the educational process” (Thompson & Walter, 1998, p. 195). Every teacher will encounter situations involving children’s inappropriate, ranging from merely disruptive to severely detrimental, behavior. Successful classroom discipline requires thinking and planning, not only to prevent problems but also to have a prepared approach for effectively responding to students’ unacceptable actions.

Before the first day of school, most elementary teachers have either gone to the teacher supply store and purchased bulletin board cut-outs or have painstakingly made storybook characters or furry creatures to communicate a list of behavior expectations to their new students. The teacher’s rules, posted on the bulletin board, generally include “Raise your hand to speak,” “Keep your hands to yourself,” and “Keep your eyes on your own paper.” In addition to those who post a set of rules, there are teachers who make rules up as they go along, and consequently respond to one crisis after another (Petterle, 1997). In either case rules are engineered to reward consequences and teach obedience, leading children to believe that those who faithfully follow the rules are “good” and earn favor in the eyes of the teacher, and that those who do not are “bad” and earn punishment (Curwin & Mendler, 1997).

The word “punishment” by itself refers to a variety of penalties--loss of privileges, detention, a telephone call home, or a red zero on an assignment. Physical punishment almost always alludes to spanking, particularly when the term is used in conjunction with schools (Brewer, 1998). Punishment can also refer to sending children home from school. In any case, punishment implies that the teacher overpowers the student in order to teach obedience.

While punishment can have a place in an overall discipline plan, it does not empower children to solve their own problems, and it does not ensure personal and academic growth (Eaton, 1997; Gottfredson, 1989; Radd & Harsh, 1996). In fact, being controlled by fear of punishment often makes the student angry, resentful, fearful, and dependent upon force (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). Sending children home from school as punishment has its own negative consequences; idleness, combined with insult and shame, is a strong enticement for students to seek revenge. Studies indicate that “get tough” punishments are not very effective in alleviating behavioral problems (Doyle, 1986).

Discipline is greater than a system of rewards, which, if not earned, becomes the precursor to punishment. Effective school discipline teaches students personal responsibility and implies a method of teaching children self-control, self-direction, and respect for self and others (Cohen, 1998). It focuses on improving behavior through a consistently nurturing and supporting environment. Although it intends to teach and reinforce positive behaviors, it is not effective without strategies to diminish undesirable behaviors (Cohen, 1998). It may not appear to get the immediate results teachers want, but it holds students accountable for their own behaviors and demonstrates a connection between what the child has done and what happens as a result (Curwin & Mendler, 1997).

Because children are more receptive to learning just after an inappropriate behavior, the window of time immediately following the incident should be used to help them understand the consequences of their action and to teach alternative ways to deal with the problems they face (Eaton, 1997). That teachable moment is destroyed if the child is punished because learning is less effective in a disruptive atmosphere (Radd & Harsh, 1996). “Time-out” was developed on

the premise that temporary segregation from mainstream activity provides children an opportunity to gain self-control and to become responsible for choosing when to return to the group (Brewer, 1998). Several educators (Betz, 1994; Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Miller, 1984), however, have noted that instead of using “time out” to teach responsibility, many educators use it as yet another punishment. The teacher’s approach to discipline can either create or squelch a child’s self-esteem (Eaton, 1997).

As a society, we confuse discipline and punishment, and we are unsure of the effectiveness of spanking as a behavior-modeling device. In 1995 a survey conducted by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse found that half of the participating parents reported not hitting their children in that year. Other surveys that same year demonstrated large numbers of parents reporting that they did hit their child, and that they considered spanking to be necessary (Center for Effective Discipline, 1996). Our school systems often reflect this confusion as teachers try to make students into good boys and girls with hurtful and humiliating discipline strategies (Curwin & Mendler, 1997).

It is a challenge for preservice teachers to manage inappropriate student behavior during their student teaching experience (Graham, Holt-Hale, & Parker, 1993; Harrison, Blakemore, Buck, & Pellet, 1996). They know that if they do not have an orderly classroom, they will spend more time squelching chaos than orchestrating an effective learning environment (Boyce, 1997). They also come to understand that as inservice teachers, they had better “take control” of student behavior and keep a lid on noise if they want to avoid confrontations with the children, their parents, and perhaps even the principal.

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of future teachers regarding discipline

and classroom management as well as the influences that contributed to the formation of these views.

Methodology

Subjects

Undergraduate students (n=90) majoring in elementary education at two public universities located in the southern United States participated in this study. All subjects had successfully completed the prerequisites required for student teaching and responded to the questionnaire prior to beginning their student teaching experience.

Of the ninety subjects, 82 were female, and eight were male. Seventy-five (83 %) subjects were European-American. In addition, there were 13 African-Americans, one Hispanic-American, and one Asian-American. One-half (45) of the subjects were between 18 and 23 years of age. The remaining number of participants in each age range was as follows: 21 who were between 24 and 29 years, 18 who were between 30 and 35 years, four who were between 36 and 40 years, and two who were 40 years of age or older.

The subjects were permanent residents of five different states, with the vast majority residing in Alabama (46) and Mississippi (41). Other states represented included Florida, Louisiana, and Missouri, with one subject each. Despite varying backgrounds, most subjects reported that their prior experience supervising children came from volunteer (81%) and/or work (75%) activities. Furthermore, 37 (41%) subjects were parents , and five (6%) were step-parents.

Data Collection and Analysis

An open-ended questionnaire developed by the researchers was used to obtain data for this study. The questionnaire consisted of five demographic items and the following five

questions:

1. Do you distinguish between these terms: guidance, discipline, and punishment? Please explain.
2. Were you spanked as a child? How do you feel about spanking? What is your reaction to people who oppose it?
3. Were you ever placed in time out as a child? Have you ever used this approach as an adult? How do you feel about it?
4. Please rank from 1 (the most) to 3 (the least) how these influences impact your personal philosophy of classroom management: the way you were reared at home, the way you were taught in school, and what you have learned in your university classes.
5. What have you learned at the university that will help you with classroom management as you move into student teaching? What do you wish you had learned in your education courses about classroom management?

Response to the questionnaire was both voluntary and anonymous. Those subjects willing to be contacted regarding further participation in this study, however, indicated interest by providing their name, address, and phone number at the bottom of the completed questionnaire.

Questionnaires were individually analyzed by two researchers for the purpose of determining patterns and similarities. Following a collaborative analysis of the researchers' notes, findings were formulated and discussed. Key issues and recurring themes identified in these findings served as the basis for developing the following set of semi-structured interview questions:

1. How do you feel about spanking in schools?
2. What discipline technique(s) will you use in your classroom?
3.
 - a. How does discipline affect the way a teacher is able to teach?
 - b. How does discipline affect the way a student is able to learn?
 - c. How does the teacher's style of teaching affect the students' behavior?

Follow-up interviews were conducted with 20 subjects (10 at each university) randomly selected from the 38 respondents who indicated an interest in further participating in this study. The subjects were interviewed via telephone during the last week of their student teaching experience. Interview findings were combined with data obtained from the previous analysis of questionnaire responses, resulting in a synthesis of findings.

Results

When asked to explain the distinction, if any, which exists between the terms guidance, discipline, and punishment, 83 (92%) subjects reported that these terms were not synonymous. Guidance was most often defined as providing “direction” (45 times) and “modeling” (13 times), with the terms “advice” (8 times) and “leadership” (5 times) also appearing frequently. Discipline was repeatedly defined as a set of “rules” or “standards” (21 times), with 51 subjects stating that discipline must be taught. In defining punishment, the most commonly used phrases were “negative consequences,” (55 times) “loss of privilege,” (10 times) and “penalty” (6 times). Of the seven remaining subjects, three felt that these terms were not distinguishable due to their interrelated nature, while four described discipline and punishment as being interchangeable or differing only in degree. For example, “punishment is a harsh form of discipline.”

Eighty-four (93%) subjects indicated they were spanked as a child, and six (7%) reported

that they were not spanked as children. All eight (9%) subjects who opposed the use of corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children felt there were more appropriate methods available, while three of these subjects stated their belief that physical punishment encourages violence in times of conflict. Overall (82 times), the use of spanking as a discipline technique was viewed positively. Several subjects, however, indicated that corporal punishment should be used with limitations (i.e. with hand only, not leaving marks, etc.). Seventeen subjects advocated only the minimal use of spanking, (12 times) possibly as a “last resort,” (7 times) while 10 subjects approved of spanking only when it was used at home by the child’s own parents.

In regard to time-out, 20 (22%) subjects reported being placed in time-out--either by parents, caregivers, or teachers--as a child, while 70 (78%) subjects did not have this experience. Fifty-nine (66%) subjects, however, reported having used time-out--either with their own or other children. The use of time-out as a discipline technique was viewed positively by 31 (34%) subjects who made comments such as “I use this approach often with my children. I feel it is a great approach” and “I believe in it 100%.” Similarly, 28 subjects found time-out to “work for some children” in “certain circumstances.” Five respondents emphasized the need for the amount of time spent in time-out to be short, with one subject suggesting that a child’s stay in time-out be equivalent to one minute for each year of his/her age. Praise for this particular technique was most often attributed to the fact that it allowed time for the child to “cool down,” (5 times) “reflect,” (3 times) and/or “think” (6 times) about the inappropriate behavior. Five subjects also cited the benefit of providing time for the adult to “calm down” (3 times) and to “think” (2 times) about the situation. Thirty-one (34%) subjects viewed time-out as a “stupid” (2 times) concept and a “waste of time” (2 times) and believed it to be currently overused (2 times). In addition,

time-out was criticized for producing only short term effects (2 times) and for allowing children to continue to misbehave in a new location (2 times).

When asked to prioritize the influences which impacted the development of their personal philosophy of classroom management, the majority (66%) of subjects ranked the way they were reared at home as the most compelling factor. Similarly, 53 (59%) subjects reported that information gained in university courses was the least significant factor. Only 13 (14%) subjects felt that university training was more prominent than home life or personal school experiences in impacting their views of classroom management.

Thirty-three (37%) subjects felt that instruction in classroom management techniques was either completely omitted or only minimally addressed in their university course work. Twelve (13%) subjects attributed the knowledge they gained on this subject to the cooperating teachers with whom they worked during university-directed field experiences, and five (8%) subjects reported that they relied on prior personal experiences (i.e. parenting, teaching Sunday School, etc.). In reference to their limited preparation, 22 (24%) subjects recommended a separate, semester-long course dealing with classroom management, while 11 (12%) subjects suggested integrating the information into the required teaching methods courses. Despite differences in regard to format, there seemed to be consensus (58 times) that subjects desired more information discussing management and discipline issues. Twenty-one (23%) subjects felt addressing this topic during one's student teaching experience was "too late." In the words of one subject, "learning solely by trial-and-error is a definite disadvantage." Although both universities represented offer a course in classroom management in conjunction with the student teaching experience, subjects indicated that they would prefer such a course at the beginning of their

program, (3 times) before student teaching, (6 times) and, ideally, prior to field experiences (12 times).

Interview results confirmed the indication present in questionnaire responses that discipline is an area of chief concern and a point of controversy for preservice teachers. Of the 20 subjects interviewed, 13 (65%) advocated spanking as a means of discipline in schools. Nine (45%) respondents, however, advocated spanking within certain limits, such as after obtaining parental consent, (4 times) or when administered by the principal, (4 times) or when used as a last resort (3 times). Reasons for advocating the use of corporal punishment varied from “It lasts longer than a checkmark,” to “Sometimes it is the only thing that works.” Seven (35%) subjects opposed spanking in schools because they felt that “Spanking is the job of parents, not the school,” or that “Spanking does not work.”

During interviews, subjects indicated that Canter’s Assertive Discipline procedure, (4 times) Wong’s “You Choose To . . .” model, (3 times) and time-out (3 times) were the preferred discipline techniques for classroom use. In addition, respondents mentioned employing the following approaches: denying privileges, issuing verbal warnings, redirecting behavior, assigning sentence writing, using behavior journals, notifying parents, providing praise and positive reinforcement, providing rewards and punishments, conducting student-teacher conferences, and eliciting the principal’s assistance.

All 20 of the subjects interviewed realized the connection between classroom management and instruction, stating that without discipline, the teacher cannot teach in various forms. Nine (45%) subjects specifically stated that discipline problems “disrupted,” “distracted,” or “interrupted” learning, while all shared the view stated by one respondent that “There must be

a certain level of discipline maintained in a classroom in order for students to learn.” In regard to the teacher’s style of teaching, there was again consensus by all 20 respondents that the teacher was a role model whose mood and attitude determined the general classroom climate, thereby affecting student behavior.

Conclusion

The results of this study support the conclusion that most preservice teachers could clearly define guidance in positive terms of modeling and leading. Yet, conspicuously absent from their definition was any reference to the task of the classroom teacher to foster the development of self-control and socialization skills, and to create the context for positive discipline. Instead, preservice teachers reported that discipline is synonymous with “ways to make children behave.” They also posit that it is their responsibility to teach obedience, realizing that failing to do so negatively affects their ability to teach effectively.

Preservice teachers readied by the university to practice their profession rely more heavily on information they have gleaned through personal experience than through instruction received in their teacher education program when classroom management is considered. Most reported growing up in settings where spanking was the major form of discipline. Students felt that their parents usually explained why they were being spanked, and they evaluated the physical punishments they received as effective. Those who viewed “time out” as a great approach reported having experienced it as a child or having used it with their children or in their jobs. Though some reported liking the method, there were as many who referred to it as “stupid.” Also, “time out” was never associated with guidance or with fostering self esteem.

The results of this investigation raise important implications for educators, in terms of

teacher education. University professors have the responsibility to teach alternatives to physical and mental punishment. It is imperative that preservice teachers learn how to help children develop clear values that will enable them to grow up with a healthy self image, to be fair and considerate to others, and to be able to make wise choices. The question of how to manage classroom behavior is not easy to answer, and preservice teachers in this study are asking their professors to spend more time helping them find the answers. In deciding how to discipline their classroom, teachers should first ask, "What do I want to accomplish?" Personal classroom management methodology has far-reaching significance in terms of the way children will be able to function throughout life.

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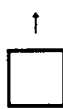
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